

Bald Eagle

(Haliaeetus leucocephalus)

The **Bald Eagle** is listed as a **Threatened** species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC). The bald eagle was listed due to population declines, chiefly because of shell thinning from DDT and loss of habitat due to urbanization. **It is illegal to harass, harm, capture, or kill this bird.**

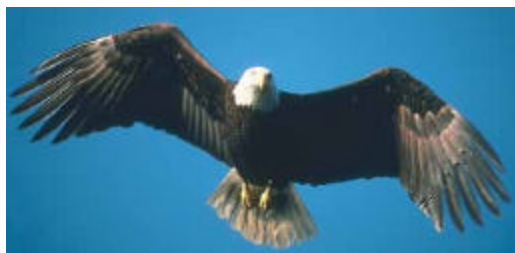


Photo courtesy of The Bald Eagle Sanctuary – Marco Island

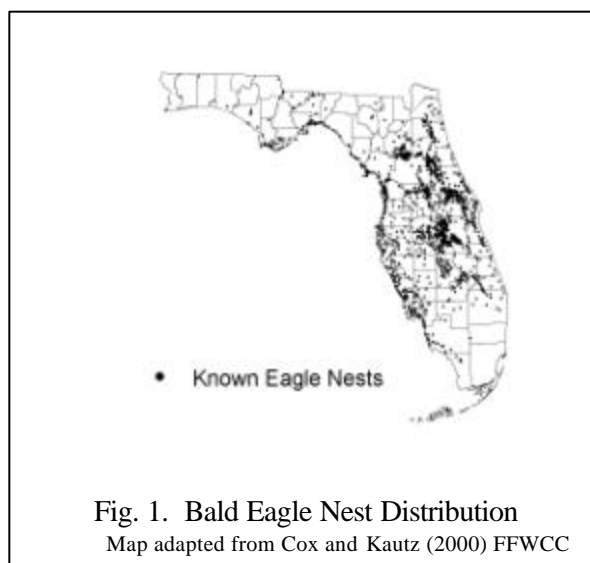
Description

- A mature bald eagle has a body length of about 3 feet, a 7 foot wingspan and weighs around 8 to 10 pounds.
- The adult eagle has a white head and tail, bright yellow eyes, feet and hooked bill.
- Immature and subadult eagles lack the white head and tail feathers and their plumage is mottled brown and white. Adult plumage is not exhibited until at least the 5th year.

A typical nest is around 5 feet in diameter. Eagles usually use the same nest year after year. Over the years some nests become enormous, as much as 9 feet in diameter and weighing up to two tons. Even when a nest tree falls or a strong wind destroys a nest, an established breeding pair usually rebuilds at or near the previous nest site. The nest may be built in a tree or even on the ground if there are no other options available.

Range

Bald eagles winter throughout most of the country, but they are most abundant in the West and Midwest. Florida's population of bald eagles comprises approximately 70% of the bald eagles found in the Southeast and nearly 1/5th of all the bald eagles found in the conterminous United States.



Bald eagles in Florida may be year round residents or migratory.

Habitat

The bald eagle lives in quiet coastal areas, rivers or lakeshores with large, tall trees. In Florida bald eagles are most commonly associated with riparian areas. Lakes and man-made reservoirs also provide excellent habitat.

Nests are most often found in sturdy pine and cypress trees near a primary feeding area. In south Florida where these trees are lacking, mangroves are often used. Bald eagles are monogamous and will return to the same breeding area each year.

The bald eagle is a highly opportunistic feeder, eating both carrion and live prey. Their diet is comprised mostly of fish, but they will also feed on a variety of amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals.

The nesting season in Florida lasts from October through May, with peak activity occurring during December through early January. Nesting territories are usually abandoned sometime between late May and early June.

Management and Protection

Reducing disturbance during the breeding season and protecting and maintaining breeding territory integrity and health are the most important conservation measures benefiting the bald eagle.

Due to conservation efforts and the banning of harmful pesticides such as DDT, the bald eagle has made a remarkable recovery. In 1960 there were an estimated 400 breeding pairs of bald eagles in the continental United States and now there are more than 4,000 breeding pairs. The bald eagle was reclassified from federally endangered to threatened status during 1995. Farmers and landowners can be directly involved in the protection of this species by following these recommendations and precautions:

- Make sure all farm/ranch workers are aware of the protected status of this bird, its nesting season, and nest locations.
- Active eagle nest sites have a primary protection zone that extends outward at least 750 feet from the nest tree where human access during the breeding season (i.e., from initiation of nesting through fledging of young) is restricted without permit(s).
- Development activities that result in continuous human presence or erection of human structures are prohibited within the primary zone. Activities such as timbering operations are allowed in the primary zone outside the breeding season; however, permits are required and operation restrictions apply. Please contact the FFWCC for details.
- A secondary zone extends out an additional 750 feet or more from the edge of the primary zone. Within the secondary zone minor activities such as hiking, hunting, or off-road vehicle use may occur at any time, but activities producing excessive noise should occur outside the breeding season. Restricted development is allowed in the secondary zone, but consultation with the USFWS is required prior to initiation of activity.

- Habitat management activities (i.e., prescribed burning, roller chopping and timber thinning) within a primary zone should be relegated to the non-breeding periods. Nest trees should be protected from fire by raking or mowing around their bases to minimize fuel height.
- Abandoned nests should be considered active and managed accordingly until a nest is vacant for five consecutive breeding seasons.
- Dead standing trees and other potential perching and roosting sites near water bodies can be protected as potential nesting sites.
- Avoid using chemicals labeled as “toxic” or “harmful” to wildlife.

The FFWCC, USFWS or a qualified biological consultant can make a site-specific evaluation of an area slated for development or conversion to more intensive agricultural production. Farming and ranching operations are often compatible with bald eagle conservation.

An opportunity exists for landowners to partner with the USFWS under a Safe Harbor Agreement that assures that no additional land use restrictions will be levied against landowners who voluntarily improve habitat on their property for federally threatened or endangered species.

The NRCS works with the USFWS and FFWCC to ensure that Federal and State threatened or endangered species will not be adversely affected by actions planned by landowners. Please remember that the bald eagle is a protected species and, at a minimum, the USFWS and the FFWCC should review your proposed actions. They can be contacted at the following offices:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
(address to be inserted below by District Conservationist)

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (address to be inserted below by District Conservationist)

